TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Hanifa Deen, *Ali Abdul v the King: Muslim Stories from the Dark Days of White Australia* (UWA Publishing, 2011)

Hanifa Deen's latest book focuses on personal stories to crack open the broadest of labels – 'Muslim' – and dissect it to the level of individual lives in early twentieth century Australia, when the freshly minted *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* formed the basis of a White Australia policy that would impede non-European immigration for more than fifty years. The author approaches her task through the National Archives of Australia, recounting moments of revelation as she searches papers that sketch Australia's Muslim heritage among cameleers, shopkeepers, pearl divers, herbalists and businessmen who arrived on these shores from northern India, Afghanistan and the regions that now form Pakistan. Faced with a plethora of material, she decides to focus on 'the men and watershed events from the 1890s to the 1940s' (x), and *Ali Abdul v the King* becomes six chapters that describe specific incidents and illuminate individual lives.

The collection is well 'prefaced', opening with an author's note, a prologue and an introduction expressing Deen's desire that 'these stories may even help explain some of the moral ambiguities and strange ironies that still trouble us today' (xi). The work is never a distant recounting of archival data; instead, the personal insights, biases and meanderings of the author are ever present. The style is accessible, and exemplary of the narrative non-fiction genre in which Deen has previously published. Her place within this heritage that she describes is appropriately privileged in the text:

> The archival material stirred memories … These men with their dark skins and turbans didn't look foreign to me … they were part of my heritage … The White Australia policy was a household word in my family. (x)

Although numbers were not officially recorded, it is estimated that up to 4000 Muslim cameleers came to Australia between 1880 and 1920 (4), as well as the many Muslim pearl divers, hawkers, shopkeepers and entrepreneurs. Those who arrived prior to Federation were permitted to stay. However, from 1901 the *Immigration Restriction Act* meant that any departure with intended return required an application, not for a passport but for its opposite: a certificate of exemption from the dictation test (CEDT). If not approved, the applicant would be excluded from re-entry unless they could pass a fifty-word dictation test in a European language. Deen points out that 'my men' of the archives generally had 'little education' (103), were likely to fail this test, and were often (though not always) reviled as individuals. Nevertheless, their services were sought, which casts the CEDTs as a means to accommodate these men, yet limit – and certainly not officially embrace – their presence in the new nation.

The paper trail of the CEDT ironically produced a bulging archive in which Deen becomes immersed: photographed faces, character references, departure and arrival patterns, and not just fingerprints, but hand-prints, an example of which adorns the front cover of the book. The use of blood-red ink for this image implies stories of bloodshed, and although violent incidents did occur, they are not the all of this book.

Book reviews: *Ali Abdul v the King: Muslim Stories from the Dark Days of White Australia* by Hanifa Deen. Wendy Alexander.
Transnational Literature Vol. 4 no. 1, November 2011.
http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html

Deen's narrative steps from the extreme violence of Chapter 1, 'The Incident at Afghan Rock') to stories of supreme achievement (Chapter 3, 'The Gifted Physician of Kandahar'), and draws on a range of archival sources including newspapers, government reports and letters. Descriptions of the everyday mechanics of these transglobal lives are evident throughout, giving this work a valuable depth.

The author consistently stitches archival material to the broader social context, often drawing out inconsistencies, then leaving them hanging, unresolved, as occurs in the title story 'Ali Abdul v the King'. In 1931, Redfern shopkeeper and former itinerant worker Ali Abdul was charged as a 'prohibited immigrant' under the *Immigration Restriction Act*, despite his claim to having arrived in Australia prior to 1901. The transcripts that Deen selects from his trial reveal the day-to-day reality of itinerant Indian workers in Australia at this time, and often contradict the stereotype of these men as isolated, reviled loners. Defence witness Emma Croaker of Braidwood tells how her husband and Ali became friends over the years, Ali often working on their property: 'My husband became fairly fond of him. My husband talked to him when they were both home. They mostly yarned outside' (122). How was it that Croaker struck up a friendship with Ali, Deen wonders, when 'most men kept a distance; when people supported the notions underlying the White Australia Policy and had little to do with Indians or Ghans or '"Asians"' (122). Such archival selections show the detail of events, rather than building a thesis to explain the animosity that generally surrounded this diaspora. The archival bumps and variations resonate with Deen's ponderings, and invite readers to roll these stories around in their own minds in similar fashion.

In Chapter 4 'Din, Dean, Deen?' Hanifa Deen weaves family anecdotes of her grandfather Fatteh Mohammad Dean with the author's archival search for him. Deen's findings about her grandfather illuminate his life beyond family lore, and her musings on these findings further illuminate the lives his contemporaries, particularly the social structures in India that supported travel 'to and fro between India and Australia' by young men more frequently than researchers had previously recognised (90). Deen opens with an interesting 'fantasy' (84) that her grandfather and the renowned herbalist Mahomet Allum, discussed in Chapter 3, were acquainted. Even though nothing in the archive nor in her family history suggests this, it is a plausible supposition. This flight of fancy acts as poignant reminder that, although the twists and turns of a life may be traced within an archive, the archive cannot on its own fully plot the life. Possibilities expand with each artefact discovered, leading more often to questions than answers. Plausible imaginings are supported: 'to preserve my sanity, I concocted the following scenario,' states Deen, as she tries to make sense of her grandfather's many embarkation and arrival dates (92). This frankness illustrates Deen's acceptance of the easy flow between documented life and imagined life, and her awareness that the 'what if' of fiction is a ready cohabitant in the archives.

It is evident that the author is surprised by the extent of the paper trail these pioneers left in the national archive, considering their presence in the broader conversation of the Australian past has generally remained marginal: even as 'our folklore and mythology were taking wing [they were] excluded from the self portraits we were painting' (9). Later twentieth century scholarship, such as Christine Stevens' *Tin Mosques & Ghantowns* (1989) and Pamela Rajkowksi's *In the Tracks of the*

Camelmen (1987) and more recently the South Australian Museum's travelling exhibition *Australia's Muslim Cameleers: Pioneers of the Inland 1860s–1930s* and its associated Wakefield Press publication (2007), as well as Deen's previous work in this field *Caravanserai*, are building a literature that addresses this diaspora as a scholarly and popular blind spot. Valuing the individual life as a conduit to tell a larger story renders *Ali Abdul v The King* an enriching contribution to this literature.

Wendy Alexander